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ABSTRACT

A report and recommendations endorsed by the New York State School Boards Association concerning the problem of functionally illiterate students leaving school are presented as an official position paper. Recommendations are made in the areas of local action, action to be undertaken by the commissioner of education, state action, federal action, private-sector action, and coordinated action for employment readiness. The costs of illiteracy affect employers and society, as well as the individuals directly concerned. It is difficult to address the illiteracy issue due to a web of problems with the social system and the educational system. Many local, state, and federal efforts have been aimed toward setting standards at various levels and enforcing them through testing and required remediation. Successful student literacy programs do exist, and a review of the information available on them suggests several themes: (1) target the early years; (2) health is a prerequisite; (3) parents and parent-teacher relationships are crucial; (4) context, reality, diversity, and activity all help; (5) full literacy requires a full-scale effort; and (6) integrated services are needed to support educational success for all students. (12 references) (SI)

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Student Literacy

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EA 021 647

A Position Paper of the
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Student Literacy

A Position Paper of the
New York State
School Boards Association

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Preface

Inspiration for this position paper came from a resolution adopted at the Association's 1988 Annual Business Meeting in Buffalo. It was resolved:

> That the New York State School Boards Association establish a task force to develop appropriate recommendations to the Association to address the problem of functionally illiterate students leaving our schools.

Established in December 1988, the Task Force on Student Literacy worked with Association research staff to develop a report and set of recommendations that were submitted to the Board of Directors in June 1989. With only minor revisions, the report and recommendations were endorsed by the Board and now are presented as an official position paper.

On this Association's behalf, I want to express gratitude and praise for the excellent work of the Task Force on Student Literacy. Members of the group are as follows:

Howard S. Harris, member, Yonkers Board of Education, Chair
Joseph M. Barry, member, Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services
Peter A. Huyler, member, Delaware-Chenango-Madison-Otsego Board of Cooperative Educational Services
Irene H. Impellizzeri, vice president, New York City Board of Education
Nancy Reale, member, Ticonderoga Board of Education
Charles K. Schmidt, member, Madison-Oneida Board of Cooperative Educational Services
Catherine Spoto, member, New York State School Boards Association Board of Directors

Judith H. Katz,
immediate past president

Recommendations

1. The commissioner of education should:
   - Review and evaluate the current criteria for permitting students to leave school, and develop appropriate recommendations concerning skills for employment or continued academic study that students should be required to achieve before they are permitted to leave school
   - Recommend to the Board of Regents and the state legislature appropriate action to ensure the social survivability of all students leaving school
2. To support the preceding, the following fundamental changes are needed:
   - Creation of an atmosphere of high expectations for all students within a framework that addresses differences and needs by individualizing the instruction and counseling of children at risk as much as possible
   - The improvement and addition of evaluative tools adequate to assess student progress in literacy
   - The improvement of instructional and remedial methodologies to ensure student success
   - Increased development of and reliance on teacher competence and professional judgment in diagnosis, instruction and assessment
   - Increased use of the principal as instructional leader in implementing the improvements listed above
   - Development of parents as essential partners in the educational process
   - Integration of school and community services to support the needs of students and their families

Local Action

3. School districts should strengthen their commitment to total literacy for all students by:
   - Emphasizing literacy and numeracy as primary district goals

- Focusing district resources at the primary grades
- Establishing desired performance outcomes for all grades
- Designing systems for early identification of and individualized planning for at-risk students
- Training all staff for their appropriate roles in developing student literacy
- Taking advantage of instructional technology to improve on large-group instruction
- Using vocational education as a high-interest, practical context for developing literacy skills
- Using aides, community volunteers and student tutors to increase attention to individual student needs

4. Districts and schools should improve their collection and management of information about students so that individual students' problems are recognized and addressed by:
   - Establishing mechanisms to encourage frequent and useful parent-teacher communication
   - Making schools a resource and referral center for family assistance so that problems that impinge on learning are addressed
   - Improving the collection and communication of a variety of data about individual students' performance
5. Districts and schools should take the initiative in training and orienting teachers, parents and students to meet their responsibilities to ensure student literacy by:
   - Emphasizing to all instructional staff their key roles in guaranteeing functional literacy for every student and making it a priority topic for staff development
   - Providing a program of orientation and training for parents that addresses learning needs of both student and parent
   - Giving students experiences in positive decision making that develop their ability to take responsibility for their own futures
6. Teachers should take responsibility for providing the best possible environment for the development of student literacy by:
   - Establishing regular, positive communication with parents
   - Fostering an atmosphere of high expectations with students and parents
   - Becoming familiar with the principles and techniques for diagnosis of learning disabilities, developmental reading, and reading and writing across the curriculum
   - Going beyond the use of standardized tests to personally assess student progress and needs
   - Teaching literacy in real-life contexts and providing a variety of literacy experiences involving the community
   - Using a variety of performance measures to ensure that students

can transfer literacy skills to the world outside the classroom

7. Parents should be trained and take responsibility for supporting student learning by:
   - Communicating needs and concerns to teachers and administrators and responding to communications from the schools
   - Creating and sustaining home environments and habits that encourage learning and growth for all family members
   - Becoming active partners in the educational system to support children's learning
8. Children should be encouraged from the earliest age to recognize that learning is an active process, and that it requires personal effort and commitment.

State Action

1. The state government must acknowledge its role in supporting the goal of functional literacy for all students by:
   - Providing flexibility in state mandates so that students most needing work on basic skills are not overwhelmed by other demands
   - Establishing agreed-on state literacy standards for both vocational and academic programs, working with local school leaders, teachers, parents and the business community
   - Reassessing the grade levels at which state tests are given, to determine their appropriateness
   - Improving competency testing to ensure that comprehension and application levels of literacy are addressed
   - Funding improved diagnostic and counseling services in schools
   - Allowing local direction of categorical funding streams so that substantial programs can be initiated to address the greatest needs of students in danger of academic failure
   - Examining proposed and mandated programs to ensure that the goal of functional literacy for all students is not subverted
2. The state government should recognize its potential for providing comprehensive statewide programs to address literacy needs by:
   - Continuing to support programs to encourage parent involvement in their children's literacy development
   - Requiring adequate preservice teacher preparation in literacy development, including diagnosis of learning disabilities, developmental reading, and reading and writing across the curriculum
   - Funding and carrying out staff and volunteer in-service training in diagnosis of learning disabilities, developmental reading, and reading and writing across the curriculum
   - Funding and establishing summer literacy immersion programs for students at risk of academic failure

- Encouraging through broader state coordination and incentives the local integration of education with other social services

Federal Action

1. The federal government must demonstrate its recognition that illiteracy and the problems that accompany it are a threat to national security, economic stability and social health by:
   - Setting the goal of full federal funding for prenatal care, preventive health care and immunization, and preschool education for all eligible disadvantaged children
   - Acting upon the need to expand the time for elementary and secondary instruction for all students in an increasingly technological society
   - Supporting the goal of individualized education beginning in the primary grades
   - Moving toward these goals through annual increases in the federal budget so that they are reached before the turn of the century
2. The federal government should acknowledge that students' mental, physical and emotional health are prerequisites to learning by:
   - Supporting a national initiative in comprehensive school health programming through the funding and dissemination of model programs
   - Funding the training and placement of full-time school health coordinators, nurse practitioners and physician's assistants, especially where there are high percentages of threatened children and/or low levels of health service available in the community
   - Improving national data collection to identify clusters of problems, explore causes, and assist with policy-making
3. The federal government should rethink the problem of transition from youth to adulthood by:
   - Exploring the relationship between current patterns of federal funding for vocational training, on-the-job training and literacy
   - Providing English language immersion for immigrant adolescents to enable them to make a rapid transition to their new schools
   - Expanding opportunities for meaningful engagement of disadvantaged young adults in society through youth service, apprenticeship, college preparation, and entry-level employment with advancement potential

Private Sector Action

Business and industry should demonstrate a commitment to national literacy by:

- Changing corporate policies and practices to promote literacy
- Promoting and encouraging student/parent responsibility for individual literacy
- Making direct use of the media to improve literacy
- Expanding partnerships with local school districts for academic improvement
- Supporting research on effective teaching and learning

Coordinated Action for Employment Readiness

All entities in support of education should recognize the value of providing every student with the skills for employment and further education by:

- Ensuring that every at-risk student is offered the opportunity to acquire academic preparation in an occupational education setting
- Directing appropriate resources to finding, counseling and, where indicated, placing potential dropouts in programs that assure their social survival
- Setting legal standards for leaving school that ensure the attainment of job skills, academic achievement, or both

Introduction

Literacy is a public matter. The ability of citizens to read, write and calculate is intimately bound up with the nation's social, economic and political life. The productivity of the workforce, the openness and inclusiveness of the political process, and the vitality of cultural life all are functions of the literacy of the people.

Literacy is also a personal matter. Those who possess this ability are at an advantage; those without it are not. Illiteracy breeds poverty and ill health, disenfranchisement and unemployment.

Literacy must become a universal goal and the highest priority in a nation such as the United States, which aspires to full democracy and equality. Every child deserves an appropriate education, and no child should be permitted voluntarily to leave school without the survival skills to assure his or her productive employment or further education or both.

The viability of American society in the 21st century depends on a high level of general literacy. Yet today the essential learning and living conditions needed to nurture literacy are being denied to many of our youth. This must stop.

Illiteracy in our society constitutes a crisis that cries out for a response to be coordinated among all human service agencies, integrated at all levels of government, targeted early in children's lives and assessable in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

Furthermore, the response must be sustained indefinitely because literacy, once attained, can be lost as the necessary knowledge and skills for productive employment and citizenship become more complex. Schools cannot guarantee literacy, but they can inspire the shared organizational and individual commitment needed to make literacy a lifelong goal.

The immediate danger is that many of today's students become trapped in a cycle of failure early on. They eventually leave school without the skills and self-confidence they will need for survival. Accordingly, attention must be focused on children's basic learning and positive attitudes early in their school lives, before failure is predestined.

Student Literacy: The Problem

Effects of the Problem

The term *social survival* has a double meaning in the discussion of literacy. To survive in society the individual must be literate, but, by the same token, the survival of society itself depends on literacy. The costs of illiteracy are shared by society and the individual, and those costs are very substantial.

Costs to Employers

Illiterate or semiliterate employees create additional costs for employers. These costs are incurred through lower worker competence; less productivity and flexibility; and increased accidents, errors and adjustment time. The bottom line for employers is that illiteracy in the workforce handicaps business performance.

A single example should help to illustrate why this is so. According to the American Society of Training and Development, before the year 2000, 75 percent of the people now working will need to be retrained because of job changes that will require improved skills.[1] People who cannot read cannot be retrained by manual or computer. They will require cost-intensive video or person-to-person training, and their ability to perform new tasks will always be limited.

Costs to Society

Taxpayers in general, as well as employers, bear the costs of illiteracy. The links between illiteracy and poverty are well established. For example, a study of welfare recipients in California revealed that more than 50 percent could not read nor write well enough to be trained for a job.[2] As a nation we spend more than $6 billion yearly just on child welfare costs and unemployment compensation caused directly by the inability

of illiterate adults to perform available jobs at the level necessary.[3]

According to a 1983 estimate, almost 60 percent, or 260,000 inmates out of a total state and federal prison population of 440,000, are functionally illiterate.[4] Although firm data are not available, one must also suspect a strong link between homelessness and illiteracy.

Costs to Individuals

Young people who are illiterate have reduced chances of reaching their full potential for a rewarding and productive life. As Gillete and Ryan wrote:

> The map of illiteracy closely coincides with the maps of poverty, malnutrition, ill-health, infant mortality, etc. Hence, in the typical case, the illiterate is not only unable to read and write, but he—or more usually she—is poor, hungry and vulnerable to illness. . . . The best argument for doing something about illiteracy is not that it is part of the immense problem of inequality in our world, but that literacy can be part of the answer to remedying it.[5]

Jonathan Kozol, in *Illiterate America*, describes a number of conversations with adult illiterates that poignantly illustrate the harsh limitations imposed by illiteracy.[6] The most ordinary pleasures—travel, restaurant dining, the daily newspaper—are curtailed. Minor mishaps—a car breakdown, an unpaid bill—become major crises and humiliations. A sense of failure and fear of exposure add to the heavy social and economic costs of illiteracy in an information-based society.

Scope of the Problem

While literacy standards have risen over the years to meet the demands of a changing society, statistics indicate an alarming number of students unable to keep up with these standards. These illiterate students become illiterate adults.

Estimates of Youth Illiteracy

A survey of young adults reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1987 revealed that while most (97 percent) could read at a basic level, only 54 percent could read well at the level of high school textbooks, and only 21 percent at the level of college textbooks.[7]

Minority youth especially are at a disadvantage. The following chart shows the percentage of black, hispanic, and white young adults at or above average fourth-, eighth-, and 11th-grade reading levels on the NAEP scale.[8]

	Black	Hispanic	White
Grade 11	31%	52%	68%
Grade 8	53%	71%	85%
Grade 4	82%	92%	96%

Chart 1. Percentage of Students at or above the Average Reading Levels

In terms of writing ability, NAEP found that only 65 percent of 11th graders, 67 percent of eighth graders and 41 percent of fourth graders could adequately perform a simple writing task appropriate to their grade level.[9] In a related study, Nancy Mead established the connection between oral expression and facility in reading and writing. Those with a low level of literacy are likely also to have trouble with oral expression, making it unlikely that these young people can compensate for lack of writing skill by using well-developed speaking skills.[10]

Competence in adult life depends on adequate numeracy skills as well as literacy. The NAEP's 1986 assessment of mathematics skills revealed that most students understand the basic facts by age 17, but they are

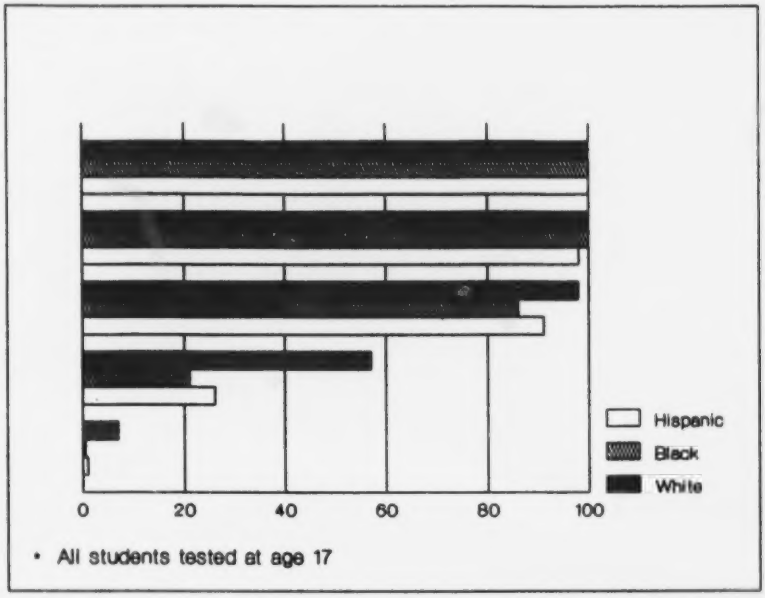

Fig. 1. Levels of Mathematics Proficiency (by percent at or above anchor points)

seriously deficient in applying those basics to problem solving; and the more advanced the task, the greater the relative disadvantage for minority students, as shown in Figure 1.[11]

The problems of literacy and numeracy cited here are particularly serious with students who drop out of school. The national high-school dropout rate is widely reported as 26 percent. It is estimated that 20 to 30 percent of these dropouts are functionally illiterate.[12] Students may be at risk for many reasons, and dropping out of school is certainly not synonymous with illiteracy. However, the academic failure and frustration resulting from illiteracy are unquestionably major causes of students leaving school before graduation. The persistence of the cycle of failure is revealed by the fact that a reported 73 percent of dropouts have a parent who did not finish high school.[13]

This situation may best be described as a quiet crisis. Its individual victims are often inarticulate and unorganized. Their very disadvantages diminish their chances to exercise their right to demand change. But others, including educational and business leaders, are becoming acutely aware of what these disadvantages cost society, and are beginning to raise their voices on behalf of these voiceless youths.

Rising Literacy Standards

Why is illiteracy still so widespread in the United States, a country with a system of universal, free, public education? One important reason is that standards have risen. In the 1800s a person was considered literate if he could write his name and, perhaps, read simple signs. Today the demands of literacy are much higher. As the NAEP data indicate, almost all those surveyed had some basic ability to read, write and cipher. But those basic levels of skill are no longer considered adequate for a literate person.

Estimates of the number of adult Americans reading at or below eighth-grade level range from 25 to 75 million.[14] For a number of reasons, precise statistics on the dimensions of the problem are hard to develop. One reason is that standards continue to rise. At present the eighth-grade reading level is an important watershed, perhaps because studies show that 70 percent of the reading material used in a national cross section of jobs is written at or above a ninth-grade comprehension level.[15]

As literacy scholar David Harman puts it, literacy is like a horizon that recedes as you walk toward it. "New definitions replace the old ones as new goals are set. People considered literate by a previous yardstick are now regarded as illiterate."[16] Stanford economist Henry Levin gives the example of the position of stock clerk, which once consisted primarily of physically moving things around. "Today," says Levin, "you have to be able to work with computer codes. It's not a lot of math, but there is still an orientation toward computer screens and communication that requires a fairly high level of reasoning."[17]

The new standard is *functional literacy* for social survival, which includes the ability to keep a modern-day job, function as a citizen, and handle adult responsibilities. A report by the Ford Foundation (1979) defined functional literacy as

> the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders and members of social, religious, and other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for themselves as being important for their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives.[18]

This definition reveals why the standards for literacy continue to rise as the demands of modern life intensify. In today's information-based society, functional literacy for social survival is at a far higher level than it was 100 years ago. Eighth-grade reading level is a convenient and fre-

quently used benchmark for functional literacy, but the use of reading ability alone as a standard, or even reading ability combined with writing, oral, and quantitative skills, seems inadequate in the face of the challenges of modern life.[19] The definition of functional literacy continues to expand.

Difficulties in Addressing Illiteracy

As the foregoing evidence suggests, a student's literacy problems do not exist in isolation, but often are part of a web of problems involving his or her family and social group. Other factors include the literacy standards set by the school district.

Problems with the Social System

Family and peer group pressures have an effect on student literacy. For example, as was noted in the previous section, 73 percent of dropouts have a parent who had dropped out of school. Other factors that may contribute to a student's academic failure include:

- poor nutrition
- health problems
- adolescent pregnancy
- domestic violence
- illness or death of a parent
- substance abuse
- first language other than English
- poverty
- lack of acceptance by peers
- unstable home situation
- low self-esteem

A student's larger social group is also significant in determining his or her chance for academic success. Where the rate of illiteracy in the community is high, where there is general uncertainty about the benefits of literacy because jobs are scarce, where the school is perceived as a representative of the establishment, there may be little incentive for students to pursue an education.

Student immigration is a special aspect of the social context of literacy. Students whose native language is something other than English face a special challenge in achieving functional literacy. This challenge may be compounded if students have not had the opportunity to achieve

literacy in their native language before they are confronted with English.

Conflicting philosophies and standards for the education of children with limited English proficiency contribute to the problem. What form of instruction works best for these students? Should children be educated to achieve full literacy in their native language first, or should they be immersed in English at the expense of the native language? What students should qualify for instruction, and for how long? Should every school district be required to provide bilingual instruction for every limited English-proficient student, and in what form? These questions have major political and economic as well as educational ramifications.

Student mobility within the country also impinges on literacy. The mobility of the American student population in general contributes to discontinuity of instruction, inconsistency and loss of student records and student adjustment problems. All can be roadblocks to academic success. A national system of recordkeeping and tracking such as the Migrant Student Record Transfer System, which compiles family, health and achievement data on children of migrant workers, may be a useful model. Such a system could provide a school district with easy access to information on a newly arrived student, while protecting confidentiality.

Problems with the Educational System

Functional literacy must become the core component for every child's educational program. In spite of agreement on this ultimate goal, school communities continue to struggle with problems of how to define, set standards for and measure literacy, and how to pinpoint causes and provide solutions for illiteracy.

Our previous discussion suggests that modern literacy involves being able to:

- make choices and judgments and solve problems
- "upskill" into new jobs and occupations
- function as a citizen as well as a worker
- cope with adult problems in an information-based society

No definitive standard exists for this vision of literacy. At best, school grade levels are used as benchmarks, and those grade levels are defined by looking at the materials that students in those grades are typically expected to master. The problem with this school-based approach is that educators cannot be sure of the degree of carry-over from school tasks to adult-world problems. What, for example, does a ninth-grade reading level mean in terms of being able to deal with equipment manuals, tax forms, rental contracts, and political campaign literature?

Therefore, to educate for literacy there must be agreement on:

1. what skills and knowledge are necessary for a literate person,
2. what level of skill or knowledge is desired, and
3. how skill or knowledge can be demonstrated and measured so that a person's literacy can be assessed.

Traditionally, grade promotions have been considered an adequate measurement of a student's progress. State competency exams have been added in recent years in an attempt to tighten accountability. However, even the state of the art testing still does not confidently measure every student's status adequately. This is particularly true for testing very young children, whose skills and readiness are so important to a successful start in education.

Educators are looking beyond tests and grade promotion for a third and better gauge of functional literacy. Collections of student work, or simulations in which students solve real-life problems, are assessment methods being explored. We are still, however, far from developing a valid, reliable and widely usable system for measuring literacy in this way.

Schools also struggle with identifying the causes of learning failure and trying to match solutions to causes. Apart from the social and fam-

"Functional literacy must become the core component for every child's educational program."

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ily problems mentioned previously, learning problems can be caused by disabilities such as dyslexia, retardation, mental or emotional illness or simply by poor teaching or a poor match between teaching methods and the learning style of the particular child. The fact that students' innate capacities and learning styles differ would seem to demand early, individual attention and tailor-made educational plans. But the costs of such individualization are often beyond the capacity of school systems. Moreover, many schools with the highest percentages of students in need of individual diagnosis and instruction must also struggle with competing problems of overcrowding, deteriorating facilities, absenteeism and in-school violence.

The science of education is not well enough understood or disseminated, nor is the funding for education adequate, to provide the perfect diagnosis and solution for the learning problems of every child. The struggle for literacy is fundamental to the larger effort in education to provide every child with the opportunity to fulfill his or her potential. It demands agreement on and alignment of goals and standards, curriculum, diagnosis and assessment, instruction and remediation, facilities, and all the other elements that make up the educational effort.

The Literacy Effort: Goals and Realities

Existing Efforts

The problem of ensuring survival skills for every student who leaves school is neither new nor unaddressed. Many local, state and federal efforts have been aimed toward achieving an effective education for every student. State efforts in New York have aimed at setting standards at various levels and enforcing them through testing and required remediation. Numerous categories of state and federal aid target students for special help. At the state, regional and local levels, a variety of innovative programs addresses the same problem.

State Statutes, Regulations and Guidelines Relative to Literacy

New York State has attempted to ensure literacy for all students by establishing minimum standards in various skills and at various grade levels. These standards are enforced through the use of curriculum requirements and statewide tests. The following are the requirements and checkpoints for basic literacy and numeracy skills:

- **Grades One through Six:**
  Instructional Requirements:
  Arithmetic, reading, spelling, and writing (along with eight other subjects)
  Testing Requirements:
  Third grade—state reading and math tests
  Fifth grade—state writing test
  Sixth grade—state reading and math tests
  Remediation Requirements:
  Remediation for students scoring below state reference point on

any of these tests, to begin no later than start of following semester; written notice to parents of remediation plan

- **Grades Seven and Eight:**
  Instructional Requirements:
  English and math—two units (years) of each, along with 7.5 other units and physical education
  Testing Requirements:
  Eighth or ninth grade—state tests in reading and writing for those below reference point on previous test
  Remediation Requirements:
  Remediation under same terms as above; may not be substituted for regular instruction and should be individualized

- **Grades Nine through Twelve:**
  Instructional Requirements:
  English—four units (years); math—two units (years), along with 12.5 other units and physical education
  Testing Requirements:
  Prerequisite for graduation—state tests in reading writing, and math
  Remediation Requirements:
  Remediation for students below passing level, designed to enable them to pass exams by the time they are otherwise qualified to graduate

There are also state-required checkpoints in social studies, science and occupational education. In addition, schools are required to screen incoming transfer students in reading, writing and mathematics, using recommended tests (unless the student has satisfactory transfer records from another New York State district).

State and Federal Funding

The recognition that many students are at risk of educational failure because of their different learning rate or style, or because of a lack of preparation for learning has led to the allocation of state and federal funding to address the special needs of those students.

The federal government provides some funding that targets students at risk of illiteracy. For 1989, the program amounts totaled $4.8 billion, including funding for ESEA Title I programs for disadvantaged students, Title VII bilingual education and programs for homeless youth and dropout prevention. If we assume that approximately 20 percent of America's 45 million students fall into this at-risk group, and if we could assume that all of the funding described above would reach that group directly,

the federal contribution to prevent illiteracy would be $536 per student per year.

New York State provides several funding streams that address problems related to illiteracy. These include programs for early grade intervention, dropout prevention, students with limited English proficiency, bilingual students, pre-K, diagnostic screening, support services, at-risk youth and other special programs. In 1988-89 the funds for those programs totaled approximately $260 million. Again, if we calculate 20 percent of New York State's 2.5 million students, we find about $520 per student per year of state funds targeted specifically at groups at risk of academic failure.

Local Programs

Many local programs have been launched to address student illiteracy and its web of related problems, often with a substantial degree of success. These include:

- business partnerships, such as work-study programs and visits to local businesses to show how employees use literacy skills on the job
- library reading programs

- programs to encourage parents to read to their children
- programs to teach illiterate parents basic skills while developing their preschoolers' reading readiness
- use of senior citizens, college and high school students, local employees, and members of the armed services as volunteer tutors
- schoolwide reading programs
- stay-in-school programs for pregnant teenagers
- use of newspapers and current periodicals as motivational reading
- alternative schools to appeal to students who do poorly in regular school settings
- drop-in programs to encourage those who have left school to return and complete diploma requirements

Limitations of Existing Efforts

Why do some students emerge functionally illiterate from the system of supports and requirements established by legislation and regulations? The answer lies not in one overriding force, but in many intertwined influences and events.

In the preceding sections we discussed state testing and remediation requirements, state and federal categorical funds and innovative local programs. The evidence that all of these positive programs are not adequate to the crisis is regrettable but inescapable. Some of the problem may be endemic:

- Evaluation and remediation are still developing sciences. We often cannot diagnose children's problems early enough, or remediate them effectively enough, given the tools at hand.
- Aid programs are often fragmented and administratively burdensome. The full impact of aid dollars does not reach the child in need.
- Innovative local programs, though excellent, are just that—local. Their effects are local, piecemeal, and may not reach those most in need.

Part of the problem lies with the negative cycle that can develop in a child's educational experience if he or she starts school at a disadvantage in some way, and if no steps are taken to reverse the cycle.

Realities That Affect Student Success

Early childhood and the primary grades shape students' lifetime attitudes about learning. A solid commitment in those early years to the individual success of every child in achieving basic skills ensures that students can then go on with confidence to other learning challenges. But if the knowledge or resources available are inadequate to address individual differences and needs, an early pattern of failure can be established for some children. When home resources are limited or there is no preschool available or primary classes are large and teachers are unsupported, students in need of extra or individual help suffer.

In the elementary grades, children who are not achieving on a par with their peers often receive a "social promotion" to the next grade on the assumption that failure to promote does psychological damage to the child. Diagnosis of learning disabilities may or may not occur, depending on staff training and district resources. Meanwhile, assignment to remedial classes may stigmatize children as failures.

The problem can then generate increased learning deficits. A child without solid basic skills falls further and further behind in content subjects such as science and social studies. Efforts at remediation take away from the time the student has to learn these subjects.

As students begin to encounter the more rigorous requirements of junior high school, those with poor basic skills can be overwhelmed. Now promotion depends on successful completion of required units, the number of which has increased in recent years. Students are acutely sensitive to their peers' opinions in these years, and those who fail courses and are not promoted suffer loss of self-esteem. A growing sense of alienation can develop, especially if a student is physically more mature than his or her peers.

In secondary school, lower-achieving students may be tracked into low-ability groups and low-challenge subjects where the requirements are extremely diluted. Practice in literacy and numeracy may be replaced by "high-interest activities" which are intended to encourage students to

stay in school, but which don't force students to confront their literacy deficiencies. Failed courses can be repeated in summer school, where standards are sometimes lower than during the regular school year.

Throughout school, the remediation students receive may be hampered by lack of qualified staff, funding, well-developed techniques for addressing each student's particular learning difficulties or out-of-school support for student improvement. Students living in surroundings that are not supportive of literacy often lose considerable ground during school vacations. Also, traumatic events may occur in children's lives that cause normal achievers to slow down, stop or even regress in learning. Often the school is not in close communication with providers of other social services who may be aware of these traumas. Therefore no effort is made by the school to address the child's out-of-school problems or adjust the learning process to accommodate them.

The role of students themselves in making decisions that affect their own lives cannot be ignored. If students are not trained and encouraged to make positive decisions about their futures, they may choose paths that lead to short-term benefits at the expense of their long-term social survival.

Students who fail the competency exams that are required for graduation may remain in remedial classes for a while; but if their age group passes them, if they fail in a second attempt, if they are 16 or over or if jobs and freedom beckon, they are unlikely to remain in school. They leave with their readiness for social survival in grave doubt.

Common Themes of Successful Literacy Programs

Successful student literacy programs do exist, and a review of the information available on them suggests the following themes:

Target the early years

Early childhood and the primary years are key. Early and intensive intervention can prevent the need for years of remediation. Young children are eager to learn, anxious to please and relatively open to schooling. Adolescent and adult illiterates have had many experiences of failure; consequently remedial programs have limited success, and attrition from adult literacy programs is high.

Health is a prerequisite

Children who are sick or traumatized cannot learn. Health problems, physical and emotional, are inextricably bound up with educational problems. Integration of education and health services is essential.

Parents and parent-teacher relationships are crucial

The schools, with limited time and resources and many children, can only do part of the job. Home environment and parental attitudes are a major factor in student learning.

Context, reality, diversity, and activity all help

Teachers can make learning literacy skills more effective and motivating for all students by adopting a number of techniques. Practicing skills in the context of interesting information or activities, using them in realistic situations and in diverse settings, and actively participating in skills practice all help children acquire and reinforce those skills. Students' innate capabilities and learning styles differ. Varied approaches can help different students develop to capacity.

Full literacy requires a full-scale effort

Society must support literacy in an ongoing way. Public libraries, pri-

vate foundations, employers and businesses, community volunteers, the media, and the armed services have all played roles in various successful literacy programs. These grass-roots efforts must be matched by a full state and federal commitment.

Integrated services are needed to support educational success for all students

The educational system must be firmly linked at the state, county, and local levels with the other social services that are charged with addressing problems of health, poverty, and employment. The web of problems of which illiteracy is a part must be attacked with integrated solutions.

Conclusion

As Kirsch and Jungeblat comment, in their conclusion to NAEP's study of literacy among young adults:

> Becoming fully literate in a technologically advancing society is a lifelong pursuit, as is sustaining good health. Both are complex and depend upon a number of factors. Just as there is no single action or step that, if taken, will ensure the physical health of every individual, so there is no single action or step that, if taken, will ensure that every individual will become fully literate.[20]

School districts have their role to play in the achievement of full literacy by all Americans, and it is a key role. But they cannot do the job alone, nor can they compel the commitment of others. Only a voluntary and mutual engagement of all the necessary parties will be sufficient to attain the goal.

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Notes

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